



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Freedom and Women's Rights in Iran

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Abraham Cooper, USCIRF Vice Chair

Thank you very much Chair Turkel. I would like to join in welcoming you all to today's hearing.

Iranians are the inheritors of a millennia-long tradition of religious diversity. Yet the current leadership continues to force its singular religious interpretation on Iranians without their consent and in violation of international law.

Iran's utter disdain for freedom of religion and belief is evident in its response to peaceful protestors calling for greater freedom of religion or belief. In recent weeks, USCIRF has been greatly alarmed by executions, sometimes multiple

instances per day, on religiously grounded charges of “corruption on Earth” and “enmity against God.”

As a Rabbi, I find it particularly contemptible that leaders of Iran’s diverse religious faiths have come under fire. Following the outbreak of protests, the government has intensely pressured leaders of the Armenian Christian community to condemn the protests and support the government. Senior members of the Iranian establishment have also placed under house arrest the country’s most prominent Sunni cleric, Molavi Abdolhamid after he called for the government to take seriously protestor’s demands and criticized Iranian officials’ sexual assault of women prisoners.

I am also concerned by the October detention of Ayatollah Abdolhamid Masoumi Tehrani, a Shi’a cleric who has criticized the Iranian government’s use of religion and has conducted public interfaith outreach to Iran’s Baha’is, Mandeans, Sabians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Christians, and Sunni Muslims. Masoumi Tehrani was held for months in Evin prison and reportedly denied access to medication to treat his liver disease. Having hosted a conversation with Ayatollah Masoumi Tehrani in my non-USCIRF capacity in February 2021, I am relieved he was released on bail on January 3rd of this year but remain concerned for his wellbeing. USCIRF urges the U.S. government to insist that Iran cease its persecution of all of these religious leaders.

Iran's government has also shamelessly continued to weaponize antisemitism as a tool of state policy. In April of last year, an IRGC-affiliated thinktank denied there was any "real" antisemitism in Nazi Germany. Furthermore, Ayatollah Khamenei routinely invokes antisemitic tropes and deliberately conflates Judaism and Israeli government policy in his tweets. USCIRF concurs with Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism Deborah Lipstadt that this "vile antisemitic rhetoric" is "unacceptable."

Iran's government has also doubled down on invoking religion to justify its religious freedom violations against the LGBTQI community. It is one of only a handful of countries that actively executes gay men on the basis of laws grounded in religion. USCIRF was greatly alarmed by the Iranian judiciary's decision in September to issue death sentences against two LGBTQI activists named Sareh and Elham on the religiously-grounded charge of "corruption on Earth" for "promoting homosexuality" and "promoting Christianity." Later that month, Sareh was hospitalized after trying to take her own life at Urmia Central Prison, where she and Elham are being held. USCIRF remains deeply concerned by Iran's systematic use of religion to target this community.

USCIRF has also been concerned by the targeting of Iranian women and girls during the current protests. To delve further into the issue, I now recognize my fellow Commissioner, Sharon Kleinbaum.